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THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ETHICS

APRIL, 1916.

PROGRESS.

JOHN DEWEY.

SOME persons will see only irony in a discussion of progress at the present time. Never was pessimism easier. Others will recognize in it a fine exhibition of courage and faith, and find the manifestation heartening. There is indeed every cause for discouragement. But discouragement affords just the occasion for a more intelligent courage. If our optimism was too complacent, it is because it was too thoughtless, too sentimental. Never was there a time when it was more necessary to search for the conditions upon which progress depends, until we can reaffirm our faith in its possibility upon grounds better than those upon which we have too blindly relied.

If we have been living in a fools' paradise, in a dream of automatic uninterrupted progress, it is well to be awakened. If we have been putting our trust in false gods, it is a good thing to have our confidence shaken, even rudely. We may be moved to find truer gods. If the reeds upon which we relied have broken, it is well for us to have discovered their frailty. If we have been looking in the wrong direction, we now have a sufficiently strong stimulus to direct our attention elsewhere. We can hardly welcome the war merely because it has made us think, and has made us realize how many of the things we called thoughts were asylums for laziness. But since the war has come, we may

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welcome whatever revelations of our stupidity and carelessness it brings with it; and set about the institution of a more manly and more responsible faith in progress than that in which we have indulged in the past.

For there can be no blinking the fact that much of that faith was childish and irresponsible. We confused rapidity of change with advance, and we took certain gains in our own comfort and ease as signs that cosmic forces were working inevitably to improve the whole state of human affairs. Having reaped where we had not sown, our undisciplined imaginations installed in the heart of history forces which were to carry on progress whether or no, and whose advantages we were progressively to enjoy. It is easy to understand why our minds were taken captive by the spectacle of change, and why we should have confused progress with change. It is not necessary to rehearse an account of the barriers which for thousands of years kept human society static. Nor is it necessary to do more than allude to the various inventions which by facilitating migration and travel, communication and circulation of ideas and reciprocal criticism, and the production and distribution of goods in a world-wide market, have broken down those barriers. The release of energies has gone on for a century and a half to a degree which we are still impotent to realize. Persons and things have been endlessly redistributed and mingled. The fixed has given way to the mobile; the settled to the free. It was doubtless inevitable that, in its contrast with static conditions and ideals, this mobility and freedom should be taken for progress. Such it doubtless is in some respects. But the present crisis is in vain, so far as our intelligence is concerned, if it does not make us see that in the main this rapid change of conditions affords an *opportunity* for progress, but is not itself progress.

We have confused, I repeat, rapidity of change with progress. We have confused the breaking down of barriers by which advance is made possible with advance itself. Except with respect to the conservatives who have

continuously bemoaned all change as destructive, these statements seem to me to sum up fairly well the intellectual history of the epoch that is closing. The economic situation, the problem of poverty by the side of great wealth, of ignorance and absence of a fair chance in life by the side of culture and unlimited opportunity, have, indeed, always served to remind us that after all we were dealing with an opportunity for progress rather than with an accomplished fact. It reminded us that the forces which were revolutionizing society might be turned in two ways: that they actually were employed for two diverse and opposed ends. But the display was not dramatic enough, not sensational enough, to force the lesson home. The war stages the lesson in a sufficiently striking way.

We had been told that the development of industry and commerce had brought about such an interdependence of peoples that war was henceforth out of the question—at least upon a vast scale. There are men now fighting who had written and lectured to that effect. But it is now clear that commerce also creates jealousies and rivalries and suspicions which are potent for war. We were told that nations could not long finance a war under modern conditions: economists had demonstrated that to the satisfaction of themselves and others. We see now that they had underrated both the production of wealth and the extent to which it could be mobilized for destructive purposes. We were told that the advance of science had made war practically impossible. We now know that science has not only rendered the enginery of war more deadly, but has also increased the powers of resistance and endurance when war comes. If all this does not demonstrate that the forces which have brought about complicated and extensive changes in the fabric of society do not of themselves generate progress I do not know what a demonstration would be. Has man subjugated physical nature only to release forces beyond his control?

Two things are apparent. First, progress depends not on the existence of social change but on the direction which

human beings deliberately give that change. Secondly, ease of social change is a condition of progress. Side by side with the fact that the mere substitution of a dynamic or readily changing social structure for a static society does not accomplish progress, stands the fact that this substitution furnishes the opportunity for progress. We cannot too much insist upon the fact that until men got control of natural forces civilization was a local accident. It depended upon the ability of a small number of men to command, with assurance, the labor and services of other men. Any civilization based mainly upon ability to exploit the energies of men is precarious; it is at the mercy of internal revolt and external overflow. By exploring the heaps of rubbish scattered over the face of the earth, we are just beginning to learn how many civilizations have arisen in the past only to sink into rubbish heaps. The dominion of man over the labor of other men is a shaky basis for civilization. And civilization never attained stability upon such a basis. The scientific conquest of nature has at least given us another basis. We have now a sure method. Wholesale permanent decays of civilization are impossible. As long as there exists a group of men who understand the methods of physical science and are expert in their use, recovery, under the worst of circumstances, of the material basis of culture is sure and relatively speedy. While the modern man was deceived about the amount of progress he had made, and especially deceived about the automatic certainty of progress, he was right in thinking that for the first time in history mankind is in command of the possibility of progress. The rest is for us to say.

I might almost as well stop here. For it seems to me that about all which I can say about the future of progress at the present time is that it depends upon man to say whether he wants it or not. If we want it, we can have it—if we are willing to pay the price in effort, especially in effort of intelligence. The conditions are at hand. We do not of course wholly control the energies of nature;

we shall never wholly do so. But we are in possession of a method which enables us to forecast desirable physical changes and to set about securing them. So much is the secure result of the scientific revolution of the last three hundred years. We also know that it is not possible to bring about these physical changes without effecting at the same time vast social changes. The men who invented the stationary and locomotive steam engine, and the men who have since then harnessed both steam and electricity to all sorts of ends, have produced social changes by the side of which those produced by Alexander, Cæsar and Napoleon are insignificant. And the same process is going on as long as applied science goes on, whatever we may think about its worth. But, I repeat, while social change, thus brought about, represents an indispensable condition of progress, it does not present a guarantee for progress. The latter depends upon deliberate human foresight and socially constructive work. Hence we have first of all to change our attitude. Instead of congratulating ourselves upon its presence and certainty as a gift of the gods, as we have been wont to do, we have to recognize that it is a human and intentional product—as much so in principle as a telephone or irrigation or a self-binding reaper, and as much more so in fact as the factors upon which it depends are more complex and more elusive.

The doctrine of evolution has been popularly used to give a kind of cosmic sanction to the notion of an automatic and wholesale progress in human affairs. Our part, the human part, was simply to enjoy the usufruct. Evolution inherited all the goods of Divine Providence and had the advantage of being in fashion. Even a great and devastating war is not too great a price to pay for an awakening from such an infantile and selfish dream. Progress is not automatic; it depends upon human intent and aim and upon acceptance of responsibility for its production. It is not a wholesale matter, but a retail job, to be contracted for and executed in sections. I doubt if the whole history of mankind shows any more vicious and demoralizing ethic than

the recent widespread belief that each of us, as individuals and as classes, might safely and complacently devote ourselves to increasing our own possessions, material, intellectual, and artistic, because progress was inevitable anyhow.

In dwelling upon the need of conceiving progress as a responsibility and not as an endowment, I put primary emphasis upon responsibility for intelligence, for the power which foresees, plans and constructs in advance. We are so overweighted by nature with impulse, sentiment and emotion, that we are always tempted to rely unduly upon the efficacy of these things. Especially do we like to entrust our destiny to them when they go by eulogistic names—like altruism, kindness, peaceful feelings. But spite of the dogma which measures progress by increase in these sentiments, there is no reason that I know of to suppose that the basic fund of these emotions has increased appreciably in thousands and thousands of years. Man is equipped with these feelings at birth as well as with emotions of fear, anger, emulation and resentment. What appears to be an increase in one set and a decrease in the other set is, in reality, a change in their social occasions and social channels. Civilized man has not a better endowment of ear and eye than savage man; but his social surroundings give him more important things to see and hear than the savage has, and he has the wit to devise instruments to reinforce his eye and ear—the telegraph and telephone, the microscope and telescope. But there is no reason for thinking that he has less natural aggressiveness or more natural altruism—or will ever have—than the barbarian. But he may live in social conditions that create a relatively greater demand for the display of kindness and which turn his aggressive instincts into less destructive channels. There is at any time a sufficient amount of kindly impulses possessed by man to enable him to live in amicable peace with all his fellows; and there is at any time a sufficient equipment of bellicose impulses to keep him in trouble with his fellows. An intensification of the exhibition of one may accompany an intensification of the display of the

other, the only difference being that social arrangements cause the kindly feelings to be displayed toward one set of fellows and the hostile impulses toward another set. Thus, as everybody knows, the hatred toward the foreigner characterizing peoples now at war is attended by an unusual manifestation of mutual affection and love within each warring group. So characteristic is this fact that that man was a good psychologist who said that he wished that this planet might get into war with another planet, as that was the only effective way he saw of developing a world-wide community of interest in this globe's population.

I am not saying this to intimate that all impulses are equally good or that no effective control of any of them is possible. My purpose is, in lesser part, to suggest the futility of trying to secure progress by immediate or direct appeal to even the best feelings in our makeup. In the main, there is an adequate fund of such feelings. What is lacking is adequate social stimulation for their exercise as compared with the social occasions which evoke less desirable emotions. In greater part, my purpose is to indicate that since the variable factor, the factor which may be altered indefinitely, is the social conditions which call out and direct the impulses and sentiments, the positive means of progress lie in the application of intelligence to the construction of proper social devices. Theoretically, it is possible to have social arrangements which will favor the friendly tendencies of human nature at the expense of the bellicose and predatory ones, and which will direct the latter into channels where they will do the least harm or even become means of good. Practically this is a matter of the persistent use of reflection in the study of social conditions and the devising of social contrivances.

I have already said that the indispensable preliminary condition of progress has been supplied by the conversion of scientific discoveries into inventions which turn physical energy, the energy of sun, coal and iron, to account. Neither the discoveries nor the inventions were the product

of unconscious physical nature. They were the product of human devotion and application, of human desire, patience, ingenuity and mother wit. The problem which now confronts us, the problem of progress, is the same in kind, differing in subject-matter. It is a problem of discovering the needs and capacities of collective human nature as we find it aggregated in racial or national groups on the surface of the globe, and of inventing the social machinery which will set available powers operating for the satisfaction of those needs.

This is a large order. But it is not, with reasonable limits, one hopeless to undertake. It is much more within the bounds of legitimate imagination than would have been, five centuries ago, the subjugation of physical nature which has since been achieved. The chief difficulty lies in the primary step: it consists in getting a sufficiently large number of persons to believe in its desirability and practicability. In spite of its discipline by the achievements of physical science our imagination is cowardly and irresponsible. We do not believe that study, foresight and planning will do for the human relations of human beings what they have done for our relationship to physical nature.

We are living still under the dominion of a *laissez-faire* philosophy. I do *not* mean by this an individualistic as against a socialistic philosophy. I mean by it a philosophy which trusts the direction of human affairs to nature, or Providence, or evolution, or manifest destiny—that is to say, to accident—rather than to a contriving and constructive intelligence. To put our faith in the collective state instead of in individual activity is quite as *laissez-faire* a proceeding as to put it in the results of voluntary private enterprise. The only genuine opposite to a go-as-you-please let-alone philosophy is a philosophy which studies specific social needs and evils with a view to constructing the special social machinery for which they call.

So far I have avoided any contrast of the so-called progressive attitude with the so-called conservative atti-

tude. I cannot maintain that reserve any longer. While in general, the opposite of the progressive attitude is not so much conservatism as it is disbelief in the possibility of constructive social engineering, the conservative mind is a large factor in propagating this disbelief. The hard and fast conservative is the man who cannot conceive that existing constitutions, institutions and social arrangements are mechanisms for achieving social results. To him, *they* are the results; they are final. If he could once cure himself of this illusion, he would be willing to admit that they grew up at haphazard and cross purposes, and mainly at periods quite unlike the present. Admitting this, he would be ready to conceive the possibility that they are as poor mechanisms for accomplishing needed social results as were the physical tools which preceded the mastery of nature by mind. He would then be free: Not freed just to get emotionally excited about something called progress in general, but to consider what improved social mechanisms or contrivances are demanded at the present day.

All this, you will say (and quite justly), is very general, very vague. Permit me, in concluding, to give a few illustrations suggested by the present international situation, which may make my conception a little less vague. A friend was in Japan at the time when the war broke out. He remarked to an acquaintance who happened to be the United States consul in the town where he was, that he supposed he would have no difficulty in getting an American draft cashed. His friend replied: On the contrary; he himself had had to spend almost two days in getting even a government draft cashed. My friend proceeded to generalize from this incident. He said in effect that in commerce we are proceeding upon an international basis; commerce depends upon a system of international credit. But politically we are doing business upon the basis of ideas that were formed before the rise of modern commerce—upon the basis of isolated national sovereignty. The deadlock due to this conflict could not continue, he sur-

mised; either we must internationalize our antiquated political machinery or we must make our commercial ideas and practices conform to our political. Personally I agree with his account of the needed remedy; it makes little difference, however, for purposes of my illustration whether any one else agrees or not. The situation is one which is real; and it calls for some kind of constructive social planning. Our existing human intercourse requires some kind of a mechanism which it has not got. We may drift along till the evil gets intolerable, and then take some accidental way out, or we may plan in advance.

Another similar illustration is the condition in which neutral countries find themselves at the present time. They are in the position of the public when there is a strike on the part of street-railway employees. The corporation and the employees fight it out between themselves and the public suffers and has nothing to say. Now it ought to be clear that, as against contending nations, the nations not at war have the superior right in every case—not by any merit of theirs, usually only by accident. But nevertheless in the existing situation they are the representatives of the normal interests of mankind, and so are in the right against even the contending party that with respect to other contenders is most nearly in the right. But if the present situation makes anything clear, it is that there is almost a total lack of any machinery by which the factors which continue to represent civilization may make their claims effective. We are quite right in prizing such beggarly elements of international law as exist; but it is evidence of the conservative or laissez-faire mind that we cling so desperately to the established tradition and wait for new law to be struck out by the accident of clash and victory, instead of setting ourselves in deliberate consultation to institute the needed laws of the intercourse of nations.

The illustration may be made more specific. It was comparatively easy to unify the sentiment of the nation when previous international custom was violated by the sinking of the *Lusitania*. It would not be very difficult

to inflame that sentiment, in the name of a combination of defence of national honor and defence of international custom, to the point of war. But it is always defence, mind you; every war is *ipso facto* defensive on the part of everybody nowadays. And defence is always retrospective and conservative, even when most offensive. A proposition to call for a conference of nations which would formulate what their rights are henceforth to be, whatever they may have been in the past, would be a constructive use of intelligence. But it would hardly call forth at present the enthusiastic acclaim of the populace and consequently makes no great appeal to the political authorities who are dependent upon the support of the populace.

One more illustration from the international situation. The relative failure of international socialism in the present crisis has been sufficiently noted, with grief by some, with ill-disguised glee by others. But the simple fact of the case is that at present workingmen have more to gain from their own national state in the way of legislative and administrative concessions than they have from some other state, or from any international organization. That they should make use of war to strengthen their claims for concessions from the only power which can make these concessions is but to be human. When the day dawns when the workingmen have more to gain in the way of justice from an international organization than from a purely national one, that day war will become an impossibility. But it is easier to try to do away with war by appeal to personal sentiment than it is to strive to institute even the first steps of any such organization—futile in comparison as the former method must prove.

I hope these remarks at least illustrate what is meant by the dependence of progress upon a foreseeing and contriving intelligence as well as what is meant by saying that it is a retail job. I can only point out the need, so far as they coincide in the further interests of peace with the interest of progress, of an international commerce com-

mission; of an international tariff board; of an international board for colonies and one for the supervision of relations with those backward races which have not as yet been benevolently, or otherwise, assimilated by the economically advanced peoples. Such things are not counsels of perfection. They are practical possibilities as soon as it is genuinely recognized that the guarantee of progress lies in the perfecting of social mechanisms corresponding to specific needs.

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